

Request to Witney Town Council – Youth Services Grant July 2024

Home-Start Oxford have been supporting struggling families with children under 5 across Central and West Oxfordshire for over 35 years. We are experienced in supporting families through challenges that include mental health issues, poverty, disability, refugeehood, isolation and domestic abuse. The support we give families is offered through both one-to-one home-visiting, and a raft of inclusive, nurturing groups.

We are appealing to Witney Town Council to continue financial support for Home-Start’s group work for young children and families in the town.

Our early intervention, preventative support helps create secure attachment, community connection, and learning opportunities for Witney’s next generation.



Sensory play at Little Splashers

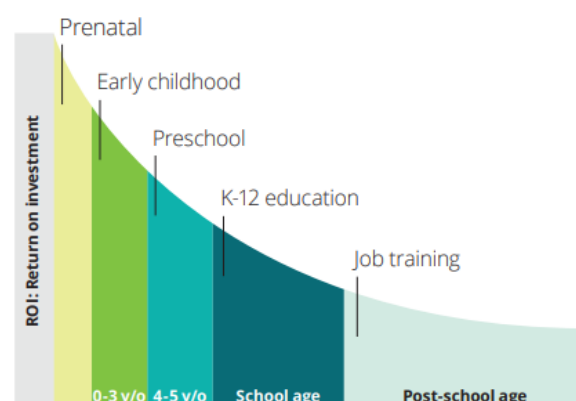
The importance of investing in early childhood development is well-documented and has recently been highlighted in the Royal Foundation report ‘Prioritising early childhood for a happier, healthier society’ (May 2024):

“Evidence shows that repeated and positive experiences before the age of five can create stronger and faster neural connections. Equally, an absence of enriching experiences can weaken the neural networks that support future cognitive, social, and emotional growth.”

The report emphasises that investing in early childhood learning has the highest rates of return:

“Research led by the Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman has highlighted the importance of investing in early childhood....Heckman’s research shows that pregnancy to age five is a critical time to shape productivity, driving later success in school and in life. In particular, investing in early childhood for children facing barriers to early development is effective for reducing public expenditures otherwise incurred later in life in remedial education, health, and justice system expenditure.”

Figure 1: Economic impact of investing in early childhood learning (‘the Heckman Curve’)



Source: Heckman (2019)⁹

Our group work in Witney is now a well-established and much relied upon source of support for families of young children in the town. Our 3 weekly regular groups, at the Methodist Church and Ceewood Hall, provide opportunities for young children to play safely, to learn new skills, to enjoy healthy snacks, to interact with other children and to have fun. For parents – many of whom are struggling with the challenges of parenting – our groups can be their opportunity to see a friendly face, to enjoy a cup of tea and a chat, to learn how to play and interact with their child, to make friends and to get vital help and support when they need it.

All our support is offered completely FREE of charge, meaning that our groups are some of the only provision accessible to ALL families.

Beyond our regular group sessions, we help the most vulnerable families by providing a range of opportunities and tailored support for the most deprived young children and their families. For example, building on previous success, we plan to run a series of group sessions to support refugee families in the Witney Hotel later this year.

Support from Witney Town Council has made it possible for us to grow and develop our vital service for young families in the town over recent years. We are extremely cost-effective, with a dedicated and highly-trained team of volunteers working alongside our skilled staff. As a small charity we have successfully bought further funding into the town through securing grants from national funders – however local funding is vital for the continued provision of our work in Witney. The demand for our support remains at an all-time high, and we are working harder than ever to reach those most vulnerable and at-risk. With costs continuing to rise and higher levels of funding uncertainty, we rely on the support of local funders to continue our work. Budget cuts and the rising thresholds for statutory services have meant that families have fewer places to turn for face-to-face support. We are seeing a continued rise in complexity of need. As a result, the service that we offer is increasingly important.



Volunteers and staff leading sessions at Little Splashers and Puddle Jumpers

“I have worked alongside Home-Start Oxford with families living in complex and difficult situations in our communities. The Puddle Jumpers’ sessions on Monday mornings at Ceewood Hall on Smiths Estate has evolved from a buggy walk into a very well attended and in my view an essential session.”

“The group enables parents and carers to join in and feel part of something, they are not alone with any parenting issues and have somewhere to go for much needed reassurance, advice and signposting. 1-1 support is available to families where needed and we are seeing much more need post-Covid due to isolation. I have seen families whom were just surviving are now thriving in the community and many friendships built as a result of Home-Start’s sessions. It is also lovely to see intergenerational relationships being forged and an excellent opportunity for volunteering within the community has been created.”

Our plans for September 2024 August 2025

With your support, we will continue to run our three free regular weekly groups in the centre of Witney (Witney Methodist Church) and on Smiths Estate (Ceewood Hall). Last year, our regular groups alone supported **193 Witney families**. Our groups provide a safe, warm environment which give parents a space for sharing and seeking advice and support. We provide a range of activities each week for toddlers to choose from, including regular and varied crafts, messy play, and group singing/action sessions.

- **Little Splashers Baby Group:** weekly for under 1s, at Witney Methodist Church
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s, Ceewood Hall, Smiths Estate
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s, Witney Methodist Church.



Children enjoying water play on our recent trip to Blenheim Palace

Once a month our Wednesday Puddle Jumpers group session is an outdoor buggy walk – as well as encouraging families out into the fresh air we promote free places to visit and give opportunities to families who cannot drive to visit local places.

We have recently developed a relationship with **Blenheim Palace** which we look forward to growing over the coming years. Our group recently visited the new Adventure Playground, with a minibus and free entry provided by Blenheim Palace, making this accessible to families who would not usually be able to visit. 23 children and their families had a wonderful time enjoying the extensive outdoor play equipment and water play.

We will offer a range of other support through our group provision:

- **May half-term and summer fun days:** we will run a free fun day at Ceewood Hall in May half-term and a series of summer fun days in outdoor spaces in Witney over the Summer holidays. These ensure that young children and their families have access to activities, healthy food and support over crucial weeks when other sources of support are often not available.
- **Each year we offer 3 PEEP Learning Together Groups:** these evidence-based 6-week programmes are for children and families facing high levels of need. Providing a vital first step into community engagement, these groups are flexible, responsive to arising need and are for families who have been referred (for example by Health Visitors). Plans for these groups in the coming year include a PEEP group for refugee families staying in the Witney Hotel. With high levels of isolation these children have limited opportunities for play. Our sessions will be themed on the story of 'The Hungry Caterpillar' and excitingly will include a visit to The Butterfly House at Blenheim Palace.

- **Outreach:** this year we are making plans to employ a play worker to assist with running group sessions. As more isolated and vulnerable families have begun attending our sessions, and as relationships have flourished between families and our staff, more families are turning to us for help. Our Group Co-ordinator now spends a significant amount of time on our vital outreach support, for example making referrals to other services, dealing with safeguarding issues, helping with funding applications for hardship needs and assisting with filling in benefit forms. Without our groups these families often have no other source of skilled support and expertise, and we have become a vital lifeline to these families. We have also been able to carefully offer support and signposting through observing children's needs – for example a delay in the development of speech and language skills, or noticing that a child is particularly hungry.

We also work hard to offer encouragement and support to families who find it hard to engage – this might be meeting a mum for coffee before she comes along for the first time, or sending a weekly text that encourages a parent with very little confidence to keep coming.

The difference we make

We carried out a recent group 'snapshot' survey at our Puddle Jumpers Group in Ceewood Hall in May 2024. Of the 22 families who responded:

- 95% reported feeling more confident in supporting their child's learning and development
- 95% felt they had extended their support network of like-minded parents/carers
- 91% felt less isolated and more confident to access the local community.

We provide families with a warm and safe space to access each week: The groups continue to be well-attended every week by parents/carers, grandparents and children. Puddle Jumpers on Smiths Estate, launched in March 2023, has successfully filled a gap for families who did not feel able to access groups outside of the immediate area.

*“Thank you for all the support this year you have been amazing! We really do appreciate it all! ❤️”
Lone parent affected by mental health difficulties*

Families have reduced loneliness and isolation and have increased their support networks: Families attending groups meet new friends and network with other parents, and we give them confidence to share their experiences with each other. As a result, they have been forming their own support groups, regularly attending other groups with new friends and socialising with other parents outside the group environment to lessen isolation. We have run our groups every week, with just a short break at Christmas. This is in contrast to many pre-school activities which do not run during school holidays, adding to feelings of isolation and loneliness for young families. We have also seen an increasing number of grandparents attending groups while their children are working – our groups offer them a source of support and it is wonderful to see inter-generational friendships bloom.

*“It's so isolating when you have a baby and all the groups stop. Your groups have been a real lifeline.”
A mum who attended our summer programme in Witney*

We have helped families access vital help and support: Home-Start Oxford provide a non-judgmental confidential approach, with our volunteers and staff being trained in safeguarding, confidentiality and advice. Families have been able to seek support with a variety of issues when they need it, either during group sessions or by communicating with our Group Co-ordinator via text during the week. We have

seen an increase in parents asking for help and advice, whether for their child or a family issue, demonstrating the growth in trust of our staff and volunteers and the feeling of a safe environment.

We have successfully signposted families who attend groups. Because of our support, families are aware of and feel more able to access other services such as Early Help, Food Bank, school, family events, the library and other toddler groups.

"Thank you for all the kindness and support you've given us. We struggled to find a group we felt welcomed into, but this group gave us that."

Mum who was feeling very isolated who now attends our Little Splashers baby group, Witney



A card received by one of our team

Toddlers have increased school readiness and have improved communication skills: All children who attend our groups experience singing, talking, playing, sharing books, games and activities. They become more active learners, build their confidence to interact with other children and to play independently. Through our modelling from staff and volunteers, parents and their children are encouraged and supported to connect with one another through shared activities and experiences.

In recent months, as children and families have become more confident accessing groups since the covid pandemic, we have seen a large improvement in children participating in craft and singing, therefore improving motor skills and language through song. Many children have picked up the actions to songs and are joining in without request. Confidence in some children has improved greatly with more independent play and play alongside their peers. The newer Smiths group tends to have a lower parent participation level, but this is slowly improving, and parents are commenting on their children singing the songs at home.

"I'm so proud of myself for coming today, and my son really came out of his shell by the end."

Witney Mum with anxiety and depression who had never attended a group

Improved outcomes for families with complex needs: Through the groups we have been able to identify several Mums in need of further support to whom we have then been able to offer our home visiting service on a 1-1 basis. This has helped them to move forward with various family challenges. This has long term consequences for these families and for their young children who are at the most vital stage of life for establishing life-long learning and development.

"We've been chatting via text, but I never had the courage to come as my anxiety is really bad. It was honestly the best choice I've made. I feel happy today."

Mum of three new to the area, affected by mental health difficulties

Case Study

Mum and her one-year-old daughter have been attending Puddle Jumpers for nearly a year. Mum was shy and quiet, spending her time playing with her daughter on her own. Our Home-Start team of staff and volunteers always take the time to have a chat with her, building up a relationship with her and helping her feel more at ease. As a result, mum is opening up and recently discussed her daughter's speech and language issues, as she was concerned.

During one of our group sessions, we invited the local health visiting team to come along to speak to our parents. The Health Visitor stayed for the whole session and answered questions from our families and talked to them about their concerns. At the session mum took part in the group discussions and spoke with the Health Visitor and discussed her concerns about her daughter's development.

The outcome of Home-Start's continued support and conversations with mum is that she is now engaging much better with other parents and services. She is now also able to give her child the freedom she needs to explore the space and activities without her, which is helping in her child's development.

Because of mum being able to speak with the Health Visitor, mum has since had a health visit assessment for her daughter and she is being referred to Speech and Language and for a hearing test.

Mum continues to update us each week and feels that the group is giving her an environment to voice her concerns in a non-judgmental way. She feels much more confident to engage with the health visiting team too.



Thank you for considering our application.